

Responding to Forced Marriage and Violence against Women: Good practice guide for post-secondary education institutions

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This guide suggests practical steps universities, and perhaps also further education colleges, can take to strengthen their response to forced marriage and violence against women (FM/VAW). The development of this guide was supported by funding from the Forced Marriage Unit. Its theoretical and empirical underpinnings can be found in Freeman & Klein (2013) and Freeman & Klein (2012).

In many regards, PSE institutions are well positioned to contribute to recognition, intervention, prevention and support in cases of FM/VAW. They have access to a population at high risk for FM/VAW and have support systems in place such as counselling, financial advice, pastoral care, and personal tutors. PSE institutions have a skilled workforce that is highly motivated to support students. For some victims, time at university may be a safe place, and one of few opportunities, to access support, in particular for FM.

However, current PSE responses to FM/VAW fall short. Based on our research two shortcomings stand out: one is the lack of comprehensive institutional strategies that are supported by top leadership, and the other is the tendency to take a generic approach toward staff training and policy development. This generic approach seems to assume that general counselling skills or a broad policy against harassment or bullying will suffice to address problems of FM/VAW where they are recognised as being within the ambit of a PSE institution’s responsibilities. This assumption is misplaced because FM/VAW require specific and well-informed responses about what to do and what not to do, and accurate knowledge of existing services, not assumptions of what might exist, or about which skills may be required to deal with these specialist situations

We recommend that PSE institutions make it one of their core institutional responsibilities to address FM/VAW by pursuing the following steps: (1) improve access to specialist services in the community; (2) invest in systematic specialist staff training and policy development; (3) participate in multi-agency working with community-based specialist service providers and statutory agencies; and (4) articulate FM/VAW in information campaigns that show that the institution not only is aware of these issues in theory but also knows how to address them in practice.

The following recommendations are aimed at HE institutions, although the principle of pursuing a systematic strategy that specifically addresses FM/VAW (rather than subsuming these issues under harassment, bullying or safeguarding) may be useful for FE institutions as well and may be adapted to FE contexts. Specialist services providers in the field of violence against women have produced guidance on how to respond to VAW, and the Forced Marriage Unit offers guidance specifically on addressing FM, which will be referenced in the resources below.

The guidance here is written with the internal processes of PSE institutions in mind. The intent is to make it easier for institutions to apply existing good practice recommendations to their own organisation. This guidance is deliberately kept short. Its goal is to improve practice, not accumulate documents. Although we are in favour of written policies, the purpose of such documents is not to exist for their own sake, but to practically guide and reflect actual interpersonal and organisational practice. Thus, the social and institutional processes of authoring and adopting policy, of training staff members on policy, of providing informed support and of periodically assessing actual practice, are infinitely more important than the document as such. The written word can be seductive. However, the point is not to sound good on paper but to work effectively in practice.

Top Leadership

- Resolve to make a systematic response to FM/VAW one of the university's ongoing core responsibilities
- Charge committee of staff, students, and representative from the FM/VAW specialist sector with developing a comprehensive organisational strategy that specifically addresses FM/VAW in policies, staff training, and information campaigns and is integrated into and clearly visible in key institutional documents such as strategic plan, health & safety policies, conduct codes, and complaint procedures.
- Encourage and facilitate continued research on FM/VAW.

Middle Management

- Create systematic relationships with the FM/VAW specialist sector
 - By having their representatives on a university committee charged with developing a comprehensive university strategy
 - By participating in local multi-agency working with community-based specialist service providers, law enforcement and others
 - By developing more systematic referral practices that will function even when individual, well-connected staff members leave the university.
- Develop written policies and response protocols that give specific guidance on steps to take when students disclose FM/VAW
- Train line managers and frontline services staff on these policies. As guided by such policies, line managers can offer consistent support for front line staff dealing with cases of FM/VAW, including support for specialised training opportunities, and encouraging ideas from frontline services staff on how to improve the university's comprehensive response to FM/VAW.
- Monitor policy implementation on a regular basis.
- Encourage and facilitate continued research on FM/VAW.

Frontline Services Staff

- Participate in specialised training on FM/VAW. This could include
 - In-house training by local specialist services providers and the Forced Marriage Unit
 - Participation in off-campus workshops or conferences.
- Use university resources such as Students' Union, Student Services, Marketing, IT and New Media departments as well as pertinent academic courses to develop and implement an information campaign for the university that offers accurate, frequently updated and accessible information about resources for those affected by VAW/FM (including campus-based and community-based resources). Accessible information is information that is visible throughout the institution on print and digital media and that is visible in public and private places (cafeteria, bulletin boards, offices, Students' Union spaces, and toilets).
- Collaborate in continued research on FM/VAW.

Resources

Forced Marriage Unit (2009). Multi-agency practice guidelines: Handling cases of forced marriage. HM Government. [Includes advice for educational institutions] https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/35530/forced-marriage-guidelines09.pdf [accessed 9.8.2013]

Forced Marriage Unit (2010). The right to choose: Multi-agency statutory guidance for dealing with forced marriage. HM Government. https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/35532/fmu-right-to-choose.pdf [accessed 9.8.2013]

Freeman, M. & Klein, R. (2013). College and university responses to forced marriage. Report to the Forced Marriage Unit. London Metropolitan University. August 2013.

Freeman, M. & Klein, R.C.A. (2012). University responses to forced marriage and violence against women in the UK: Report on a pilot study. International Family Law, September 2012, 285-299.

National Union of Students (2010). Hidden marks: A study of women students' experiences of harassment, stalking, violence and sexual assault. National Union of Students.

Web template. This is a short suggestion of content for PSE institutions to put up on their websites. It contains a general statement and links to resources. Local resources need to be inserted by the institution as appropriate (separate document).